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Forestry and Natural Resources

## Putting a Little Wildlife in Your Backyard This Spring

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As spring approaches and the seed catalogs arrive, it's time to think about your backyard landscaping. Making minor adjustments in your plant selection and placement can improve your backyard as a home for wildlife. Here are a few key things to remember as you develop your landscape plan for spring.

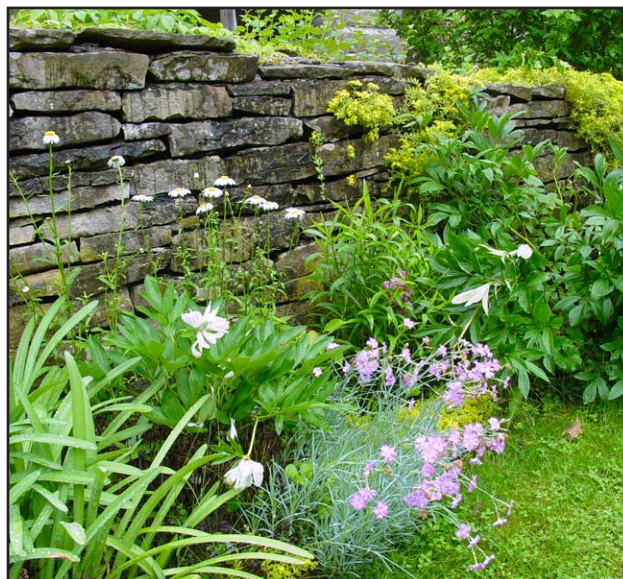
### Does your yard provide the three basics for wildlife?

Quality habitat is of vital importance to wildlife. Habitat includes proper food, cover, and water in sufficient quantities to meet a species' basic needs. Arrangement of these requirements is also important. Planning for backyard wildlife habitat is challenging in that you need to supply the basic requirements for the species you wish to attract, and it must conform and integrate with your landscape design.

*Where your home is located and the size of your property will have an affect on the types of wildlife you can attract.* People living in more rural areas that are surrounded by habitats such as woodlands, wetlands, or meadows will be able to attract more species of wildlife than those living in large urban areas. However, there is still a variety of wildlife one can view within the big city. Certain songbirds, bats, squirrels, chipmunks, and raptors are all common residents in many urban areas. Smaller lots can even meet all of the needs of species not requiring large space such as chipmunks and gray squirrels. However, the needs of those that have larger home ranges such as pileated woodpecker, deer, or turkeys may not be met on

a single piece of property and will depend on habitat components on neighboring properties. If you select the required habitat element that is in shortest supply in the neighborhood and provide that element on your property, you give these species a reason to visit your property.

*The trees, shrubs, and wildflowers you select for your yard will affect which wildlife species visits your property.* The basic rule of thumb for wildlife is diversity. Maximize the number of species you have that are different in terms of timing of blooms and fruit, height, and structure. Intersperse different trees with other plants like shrubs, wildflowers, and vines. Adding features such as nest boxes or bird feeders will further enhance your yard for wildlife, but should not be viewed as replacements for wildlife plantings. Many plants not only beautify your home, but provide food and cover for wildlife.



*How you arrange the plantings are just as important as what you plant.* A good backyard arrangement is to plant conifers and other species providing wind protection on the northwest side to block prevailing winter winds; plant hardwood trees, shrubs, and wildflowers in other areas around the yard.

## Food

There are a variety of bird, mammal, amphibian, reptile, and insect species that may want to call your back yard home. While each species has specific food requirements, providing an abundance of each major food category will appeal to the broadest array of wildlife species.

## Insects

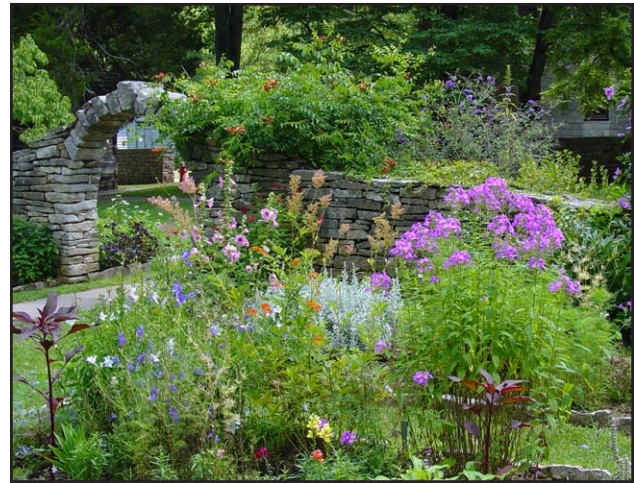
Why would I ever want to attract insects to my back yard? While this may not seem like a good idea at first, many of the wildlife species coveted in Hoosier backyards such as hummingbirds, bluebirds, purple martins, swallows, wrens, bats, warblers, frogs, and toads depend on a rich population of insects to support them through the summer.

In natural settings, insects are attracted to pockets of patchy “weedy areas” that contain a rich mixture of forbs (non-woody, broadleaf plants) and grasses. These can be created in your



Photo by Chip Morrison

yard by simply tilling small areas in the spring and leaving them fallow for 3-5 years. Leaving borders or selected areas of lawn un-mowed is another cost effective way to provide insect habitat. However, local ordinances and weed laws in some neighborhoods may preclude such practices. Check your local codes and ordinances prior to initiating these practices.



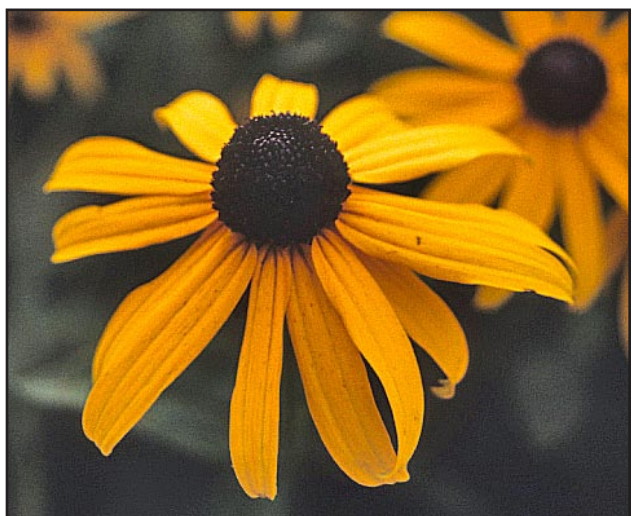
For backyard landscaping, it is critical to present these naturalized patches in a manner that is pleasing to you and your neighbor. Integrate them with other landscape features so they don't stand out. Naturalized areas can be made more attractive and acceptable to neighbors by giving them some limits and defining their boundaries. Mow definite borders around them, pave a path through them, place a small segment of fence in front of them, or plant a few brightly colored flowers around their borders. Applying a few of these suggested practices will enhance the aesthetics of insect producing areas in your backyard.

When naturalized areas are not appropriate, perennial wildflower plantings and flowering trees and shrubs can provide abundant insects. Grasses can be used as accent pieces around flower gardens. Any of these will be attractive additions to any yard and provide the needed structure insects require. Careful selection of species can also satisfy many of the seed, vegetation, and nectar requirements discussed below.



## Seeds

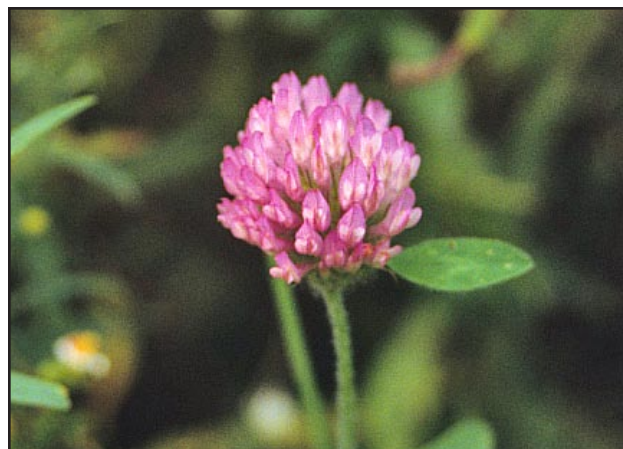
A number of favorite backyard wildlife species are seed eaters. Juncos, chickadees, cardinals, and chipping sparrows depend on an abundant seed supply especially during fall and winter months. While this need can be met by supplying seed feeders throughout your yard, a mixture of seed producing plants can enhance the attractiveness of your yard for these species. Many of the flower species selected for flower beds (black-eyed Susan [*Rudbeckia* spp.], coneflowers [*Echinacea* spp.], *Coreopsis* spp., etc.) are attractive to birds. As they die back or go dormant, the seed heads provide food for wildlife. Therefore, it is *critical* that you leave the residual growth standing throughout the fall and winter. In addition to the seed heads, these plants add structure (cover) to your garden. Adding some sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp.) can broaden their attractiveness to larger bird species that also frequent your feeders (finches, sparrows, doves, etc.).



*Black-eyed Susan.*

## Green Vegetation

Several popular backyard wildlife visitors including cottontail rabbits, deer, and wild turkeys require a rich mix of tender grasses and legumes in their diet. Adding a short clover species (*Trifolium* spp.; ladino, or white Dutch clover, for example) and palatable grasses (bluegrass [*Poa* spp.], for example) to your lawn



*Clover.*

mix will make your yard extremely attractive to these popular and interesting visitors. If allowed by local ordinances, mow your lawn at a height of 6-10" for maximum benefits to wildlife.

## Fruits

A number of bird (cedar waxwings, robins, orioles, and mockingbirds) and mammal species (squirrels, chipmunks, deer, and raccoons) are attracted by an abundance of fruits available to them throughout the summer, fall, and winter. Many fruits can be provided from attractive landscape trees and shrubs.

Tall shrubs including flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), flowering crabapples (*Malus* spp.), highbush cranberry (*Viburnum triloba*), hawthorns (*Crataegus* spp.), and many of the domestic fruit species (apples, cherries, peaches, pears, etc.) are attractive yard trees. Many of these flower during the spring and



*Highbush cranberry.*

have decorative fruit during the fall and winter. Short shrub species such as the shrub dogwoods (*Cornus* spp.), viburnums (*Viburnum* spp.), chokeberry (*Photinia* spp.), bayberry (*Morella* spp.), elderberry (*Sambucus* spp.), etc. also provide an abundance of fruit needed by wildlife calling your yard home throughout the fall and winter. Selection of these and other tall and short shrub species can provide attractive accents to your home and yard in displays of spring flowers, colorful fall leaves, and ornamental winter fruits.

Having a mixture of tall and short shrub species is also important for your wildlife visitors. More species translates to more food for wildlife throughout the fall and winter months. Different heights and structures are important because different species of wildlife forage and nest at different heights. Tree species including persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*), and sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) also can be attractive yard trees and greatly broaden the fruit available to wildlife visiting your yard.



*Black cherry tree.*

The length of time fruit stays on a plant is important. Hawthorns and highbush cranberry usually retain their fruit throughout the winter and are available to attractive spring migrants including cedar waxwings and robins when they visit your yard in February and March on their return north. While these are not highly

preferred foods when they are first available, the fruit is persistent and is available when others are not.

## Nuts

Squirrels, chipmunks, deer, blue jays, and turkey are among the visitors attracted to an abundant nut crop in the fall and winter months. Favorite yard trees, such as oaks (*Quercus* spp.), black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), hickories (*Carya* spp.), or beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) can provide shade and beauty to your home and yard while being the anchor for year around residents depending on the mast they produce. Oaks and beech produce plentiful food for wildlife, and are also excellent live den trees for species that utilize cavities.



*Beech tree.*

## Nectar

Butterflies and hummingbirds are attracted to nectar-producing plants. In general, flower species with bright colored blossoms and tubular shaped flowers (for hummingbirds) are valuable additions to nectar feeding wildlife. See *Attracting Butterflies*, FNR-248-W, and *Attracting Hummingbirds*, FNR-249-W, for more information.

## Water

All wildlife needs some source of water near the place they call home. If a permanent water supply such as a stream or pond is not present near your yard, the addition of a backyard pond





or birdbath can provide this needed feature to your landscape. Many species get their daily water requirements from morning dew or food that they eat. However, having a permanent water source is an effective attractant, especially when available water is scarce. Birdbaths and water misters are used readily by birds and butterflies. Backyard ponds or water gardens provide habitat for aquatic and semi-aquatic organisms, and are attractive backyard landscape features. Having gradual slopes and planting vegetation within and adjacent to the pond will enhance its value to wildlife.

## Cover

Every wildlife species visiting your yard has specific cover requirements. Providing an abundance of common cover categories will appeal to the broadest array of wildlife species.

## Cavities

Many yard species including wrens, bluebirds, swallows, purple martins, woodpeckers, tree squirrels, and raccoons use or require some sort of tree cavity. If you want cavity nesting species to call your yard home during the summer, suitable cavities must be on the property. Nest boxes and houses can supplement natural cavities if your yard lacks an abundance of large trees. They need to be weatherproof and designed for the species you wish to attract. Points to consider when building or selecting nest structures are the building materials, size of

the box, size the opening, height of placement, orientation, and method of hanging. See *Nest Boxes for Wildlife*, FNR-246-W, for more details.

## Burrows

Rabbits, raccoons, and foxes use or require burrows for nesting. Woodchucks are the only native species that can create burrows used by these species. Abandoned woodchuck burrows are used by several wildlife species as summer dens or winter hibernation sites. However, woodchucks can cause substantial damage by feeding on vegetation and burrowing under structures or in lawns. If you are unwilling or unable to allow woodchucks to frequent your property, artificial burrow structures can be constructed.

## Nest Cover

Many of the bird species wishing to call your yard their summer home need suitable places to build their nests. Robins, doves, cardinals, blue jays, cedar waxwings, and goldfinches will build open cup nests in tall shrubs and conifer trees located around your home. Most of the tall shrub species recommended as a source of fruit above are excellent places for these species to nest. The density and shape of their branches provide the needed structure and cover sought by these birds as they search for the site to build their summer home. Adding some conifers such as northern white-cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*), eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), white pine (*Pinus strobus*), or Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), will provide valuable nest sites and winter roosting cover for most of these species and will increase the attractiveness of your yard as a summer nest location.

Indigo buntings, cardinals, catbirds, red-winged blackbirds, and others nest closer to the ground and will seek out short shrub species like those mentioned in the fruit section above. Locate these shrubs in clusters or near other elements of cover to increase their attractiveness as nest sites.

Some species such as cottontail rabbits, vesper sparrows, and meadowlarks all require patches of dense ground cover for nesting. This is a situation where larger is better making them less vulnerable to predators including foxes, raccoons, dogs and house cats in the neighborhood. Flower beds with a grass component, native wildflower/ forb patches, and areas of grass that are allowed to grow to maturity (mentioned above under insects) will all provide this ground nesting component. Locate the ground cover adjacent to shrubs and other types of escape cover to increase its attractiveness and use to wildlife.

### **Escape cover**

Most wildlife species living in your yard are potential prey to predators that also visit your property. They will feel the most at home if they have the proper protection they need from predators. Plants with thorns make excellent escape cover for most species. The shrubs, conifers, weedy patches, cavities, nest boxes, and burrows mentioned throughout this article will also provide cover that will make your coveted backyard visitors feel at home.

When planning the placement and arrangement of all the habitat components around your yard, visualize yourself in the place of the wildlife you want to attract. Answering these questions as you plan your landscape projects this spring and summer, will make your yard much more inviting to wildlife visitors.

- When wildlife are feeding in your yard, is it possible to get to escape cover if you are attacked by a predator?
- Can wildlife travel among sources of food, water, and cover without feeling overly exposed to danger?
- Do nest sites provide enough safety and seclusion, or are they left exposed and vulnerable?

If the answers to these questions are less than desirable, slight adjustments in planting arrangement can fix the problem. Adding additional structures such as brush piles and



patches of dense natural vegetation can also greatly improve escape cover by connecting the habitat components in your yard.

### **Human-Wildlife Conflicts**

People may avoid planting trees and shrubs or establishing other practices beneficial to wildlife because they feel it increases the chance they will have a wildlife problem. Attracting wildlife near your home can certainly lead to some unwanted problems. However, you can design your backyard landscape to minimize many of these conflicts. Identifying potential problems and taking action before they occur or exceed your tolerance is the best approach. See PPP-56, *Conflicts with Wildlife Around the Home*, for the basics on identifying potential conflicts and what you can do to prevent them.

## Resources

Purdue University Everything Wildlife  
<[www.purdue.edu/wildlife](http://www.purdue.edu/wildlife)>

National Wildlife Federation Backyard Wildlife  
Habitat Program  
<[www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/](http://www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/)>

NRCS Backyard Conservation  
<[www.nrcs.usda.gov/feature/backyard/](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/feature/backyard/)>

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FNR-246-W Nest Boxes for Wildlife

FNR-248-W Attracting Butterflies

FNR-249-W Attracting Hummingbirds

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